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Weakness in Numbers: How a Hiking Partner Can Be Dangerous

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How a hiking partner can be dangerous

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I'm about to tell an embarrassing story that I've told in a few other places, including in a book I've written. But unlike those other occasions where I've shared this tale of personal struggle, this time I peel back more layers of my errors in the hope that others can learn from my near catastrophe in the mountains.

Human nature sometimes causes us to be critical of those who choose to go it alone. If a solo mountain climber runs into trouble, even the kind that proves fatal, our criticism often transitions to condemnation. As a by-product, many who yearn for a trip by themselves don't go. Some of them reject the idea because they fear stinging judgment. That anxiety cloaks their own insecurities over stepping outside their comfort zones. They choose, instead, the familiarity of doing things the way they have before. Others fear that alone they would miss glaringly obvious signs of impending problems as they climb and get lost, hurt, or worse.

But for each instance where collective effort in the mountains leads to extraordinary results, I will argue that an equal number of group trips results in a close call, a minor accident, or complete disaster—due to group dynamics. Many of these troubles escape public notice.

I do not intend to persecute those who choose cooperation or collaboration over self-reliance. Countless examples of shared achievement on battlefields, soccer pitches, at work, and in the backcountry prove that groups safeguard their members in many situations.[1]

My point is to open up our thinking so we can enjoy the mountains fully, guiding ourselves through knowledge and not fear. A group is not safer just because it's a group.

In his book *The Rider* (Bloomsbury, 2016), the Dutch journalist and novelist Tim Krabbé describes the effect of "splendid isolation" on one's psyche. Those moments when you are completely alone, exerting physical and emotional effort, connecting intimately with your pursuit—that's

1. Editor's note: Group adventures are a safe and fun way to go into the mountains, but group dynamics matter. All Appalachian Mountain Club trips are led by a person who went through outdoor leadership training. For more about this training, see outdoors.org/skills-leadership/leadership-skills/. For further reading on group dynamics, see *AMC's Mountain Skills Manual* and *AMC Guide to Outdoor Leadership*, both available at outdoors.org/amcstore.

Struggling to keep up during a stormy traverse of the Franconia Ridge in New Hampshire's White Mountains, the author was unaware of his true motivations. TY GAGNE

bliss, flow, the passion of it all. It's what the late alpinist Jean-Christophe Lafaille described as being "reduced to your most basic and essential self." The spiritual, emotional, and physical gifts—both earned and given—in these moments are elusive and cannot be replicated or fully realized in the presence of others. This form of isolation is one of the many reasons why Henry David Thoreau chose Walden, and Austrian skydiver Felix Baumgartner the stratosphere.

But solo pursuits, particularly in the outdoors, are not for everyone. Self-confidence levels, anxiety, or outright fear may contribute to the avoidance of individual activities, but many simply prefer the social bonds created through action and interaction with others. There is no right or wrong approach; the decision to go alone or to join in is personal. When one is properly prepared, has the requisite experience to be truly self-reliant, and anticipates and manages the variability of the conditions then isolation can in fact be splendid. And while there are risks associated in going alone, as I've said, the risks can be equal to—but not necessarily greater than—adding numbers.

What follows is my true and somewhat embarrassing story of the total absence of psychological safety.

Franconia Ridge, White Mountain National Forest, New Hampshire

February 2008: I was in trouble. Not the kind I was in when, at age 16, I was pulled over for speeding and, rather than issue a ticket, the officer called my father. No, this was the kind of trouble where I was placing myself and the people I was with at risk. As a new driver, I had ignored the speed limit; a little more than two decades later, I was ignoring my own limit.

The trouble began for me as soon as I awoke that morning. Low visibility outside, the cocoonlike microclimate of my warm bed, and a stout westerly wind pushing against the bedroom window were combining to create a contradiction in sensory stimulation. Was this really a good day to do the Franconia Ridge traverse? *It was not*. Red flag number 1.

Then I thought about my level of physical fitness for the challenging trip ahead. *Marginal at best*. Red flag number 2. And was I sure I wanted to spend a long, grueling day with two guys I had never met, let alone hiked with? *No, not feeling it*. Red flag number 3.

As I considered what to do, I allowed myself to suppress that initial grasp of the obvious—my rational acknowledgment that today wasn't the day to

get after it—in the interest of preserving my ego. I was not going to be the one to back out, so I rolled out of bed to prepare for the hike I'd committed to: a winter traverse of the Franconia Ridge with two people I didn't know, while out of shape and in what would surely be described as adverse hiking conditions. Somehow I knew that those first red flags would not be the last of the day.

When my wife said, "Honey, it looks really bad out. Are you sure about this?" I think I just clenched my jaw, avoided eye contact, and replied, "Yep, I'm good."

I was going to Franconia Ridge. My ride pulled into the driveway, and I collected the gear I'd set out the night before. I hadn't skimped, and the load was heavy. The weight of the gear would further challenge my already mediocre fitness level. Better safe than sorry, I'd figured. I loaded my pack into the back and introduced myself to the vehicle's sole occupant, whom I'll refer to as Greg. We made the quick trip over to the next town and picked up our third team member, whom I'll call Dave.

In a 1999 research article, Amy Edmondson, a Harvard University economist, calls team psychological safety the "shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking." Dr. Michael Roberto, a trustee professor of management at Bryant University, expanded on that definition in his 2002 case study analysis of the 1996 Mount Everest disaster, when eight climbers died in a sudden storm: "Team members demonstrate a high level of trust and mutual respect for one another," he wrote. "Team members do not believe that the group will rebuke, marginalize, or penalize individuals for speaking up or challenging prevailing opinions."

Outdoor organizations are collegial groups with shared interests, and they organize group events with trained leaders. But some adventurers forgo organizations and go out in loosely organized groups of families, friends, and acquaintances. A shared passion and sense of belonging can create a perception of collective understanding and high trust. But if we do the necessary work and dive a bit deeper into the dynamics described, we are apt to find the unspoken of, or ignored, vulnerabilities that arise when hikers arrive at the trail with differing expectations and values for a day or more in the backcountry. Even groups with members who've known each other for a long time face these vulnerabilities. Each of us must self-assess and recognize that we bring our own "stuff" to the trail.

I'd met Greg and Dave through my wife, who knew Greg's partner and had learned that Greg and his friend Dave would traverse the Franconia Ridge that weekend. Although I had climbed Mount Lafayette many times in winter, and often in high winds, I hadn't continued on from its summit, over the 2.8-mile exposed ridge to Mount Haystack. I had always wanted to. I had never hiked with these guys, but I knew both of them had a lot of winter experience. They were close friends who climbed ice and took long outdoor trips together, and I sensed a strong backcountry chemistry between the two that I didn't share. My experience level wasn't much different from theirs, but the trust they had in each other was based on shared experience and easy camaraderie. We would get along fine, but I was, in a sense, the outsider.

According to Roberto, three conditions drive group or team behavior and decision-making: member status differences, leader coaching and support, and level of familiarity or prior interaction.

Member status differences: It is quite normal for us to "size up" others within our group. This kind of scorekeeping causes us to label others, allows us to make assumptions about levels of experience and expertise, and can contribute to the construction of perceived hierarchies within the group. Although these instinctual reactions sometimes can be a positive trait, helping us recognize strengths and weaknesses before activities commence, they can also create a significant barrier to establishing an environment of transparency and, ultimately, trust. When members of a group or team perceive differences in a negative way, they are much less apt to express concerns out of fear of isolating themselves or projecting personal weakness.

Leader coaching and support: On those occasions when there is a clear leader, that individual's leadership style established at the outset has a tremendous impact on how the team itself will behave. It is not realistic to believe there's a one-size-fits-all leadership style for every situation or activity. But leadership behavior sets a tone, whether positive or negative.

Level of familiarity or prior interaction: Unfamiliarity with others in the group or team can create a sense of insecurity, similar to the insecurity created when measuring perceived status differences. At the same time, companions who have gone out together can feel overconfident or complacent, particularly if they've done well before.

The ride north with my two hiking companions was quiet. The winter wind whooshed against the car, nudging it from side to side as if the driver were drunk. He wasn't, but I recall wishing *I* were a little bit buzzed, just to

take the nervous edge off. Up in the front seat, my companions chatted, and their easy relationship reminded me of the bond I shared with my climbing partner, Ron. In that moment, I wished he were there. If he had been, I know I would have felt more relaxed. I had moved to the back seat when we headed north, and I didn't talk to them. It's not that I didn't like these guys or that they were shutting me out. My own "stuff"—mental baggage—was getting in the way. I felt I had something to prove to them, something they already knew about each other, and that made me insecure. I would chime in here and there like an awkward teenager trying to make conversation with the cool kids.

My team had status differences, and it had no clear leader. We did not have psychological safety. We had an environment where individuals might not speak up, even if they perceived the system changing so that they felt uncomfortable. As Roberto identifies in his Everest analysis, "An absence of candid discussion and constructive dissent makes it difficult to identify and solve problems before they trigger a series of other breakdowns in the system."

When respected and embraced, the three components of team psychological safety mitigate risk and heavily influence how well the team does. That means not just reaching the summit but also making the choice to turn back if unfavorable conditions affect the group or any of its members.

The 1996 Everest disaster showed how weaknesses in teams create danger. Although some climbers were technically stronger than others, the social and emotional vulnerabilities of the Everest climbers drove the tragic outcome. This effect is not isolated to Everest in 1996 nor to 8,000-meter peaks in the wilderness. Group dynamics affects team performance in all types of conditions and circumstances.

But for the purposes of this essay, let's keep things closer to home as we continue with my own story on the much lower and more accessible Franconia Ridge in New Hampshire.

We arrived at the Lafayette trailhead, parked the car, and retrieved our packs. There were downed branches and other debris scattered about the parking area; the wind was crazy loud; and I couldn't even see the summits or the ridge, which were socked in with fog.

"Hmm—full conditions," deadpanned Greg, whom I'd perceived to be the trip leader, maybe because he was the driver. Packs on, we started moving. No time to waste, too cold to dilly-dally. The weather on Mount Washington, not far from where we stood in Franconia Notch, tells the day's story:

Maximum temp: 27° F

Minimum temp: 6° F
Average temp: 17° F
Average wind speed: 61.1 MPH (from the southwest)
Maximum wind speed: 118 MPH

Had I checked the weather leading up to departure? *No*. Did I ask Greg or Dave if they had checked the weather? *No*. Was the weather in the parking lot bad? *You bet*. I wanted to go home. By that time, I had already lost count of the red flags.

The start of the Old Bridle Path is relatively flat, and I felt good weaving through snowy woods, crossing over partially frozen streams, and staying close to the other two. But as the inevitable inclines appeared, things began to change for me. Greg and Dave were moving at a pretty good rate, faster than I usually would have, even at a higher level of fitness. It was early, and I was already pushing myself, with steeper and more challenging terrain ahead. I was not drinking water, not snacking. This was not good.

I soon fell behind. I could see Greg and Dave, but the gap between us was obvious. I probably had burned more calories in 45 minutes than I'd burned in any exercise all winter. I labored up the steeper sections of the approach to Greenleaf Hut. High on the trail, close to treeline, the wind erupted in a cacophony of violent and intimidating noise. This felt dumb. This felt *wrong*.

I arrived at the hut, which had been boarded up for winter, shortly after Greg and Dave. They were layering up out of the wind, hydrating, fueling, and making small talk. I added a jacket, but I can't remember if I ate or drank much. The quick break was over. Again, no time to dawdle. Our momentum toward treeline and the Mount Lafayette summit continued.

The walk from Greenleaf Hut to treeline is really quite beautiful, and despite my struggle to keep going, I couldn't help but admire my surroundings. Across a frozen pond and into a thick patch of spruce trees, I enjoyed a brief interlude of splendid isolation, even with partners near.

But once we arrived at treeline and headed into unprotected terrain, reality bit again. I've never skydived, but standing at treeline and preparing myself to continue onward felt like standing in the open doorway of a small plane. The wind, like a thousand bitterly cold hands, forced an unwelcome, deep-tissue massage on my back, my entire right side, and my brain.

Soon I fell farther behind. On occasion, I lost sight of my companions, who were making great haste to get up and over the backside of the summit and out of the strongest wind gusts. It's impossible to re-create with any coherence what I was thinking and feeling at that point. It was mainly

sensory perception: wind high, visibility low, body cold and tired. I was losing confidence at every step. And I was feeling stupid.

Why is there complexity in what would seem to be a casual group hike? How can a team be firing on all cylinders one minute and knocked back on its heels in a defensive posture the next? Why does a leader continue marching a group forward when all arrows point in the opposite direction? And why does the group allow it? Although location and weather can contribute, the answer often lies in human factors.

Human factors are the behaviors and actions that exist or emerge within individuals and groups. Behaviors influence the decisions and performance of those individuals and teams, and as such, that performance has a direct effect on the outcome. Individual behaviors of the soloist have influenced both good and bad outcomes, but when you integrate the behaviors of any number greater than one, things can get really interesting.

Dive headfirst into a copy of Nick Howe's *Not Without Peril* (AMC Books, 2010), immerse yourself in Peter Kick's book *Desperate Steps* (AMC Books, 2015), or read Sandy Stott's Accidents report in this journal and you will find ample examples of good times lost through the decisions made by pairs and groups. Whether alone or with others, hikers manage risk by considering individual and group dynamics and perceptions and biases. They arrive at the trailhead with varying degrees of life and technical experience—some known to the rest of the group, and others not shared. Perceived differences among group members serve as a powerful force in how the group as a whole behaves. If those differences are understood and accepted, that information provides a healthy framework for the team as it moves toward its planned objective. If these differences are ignored or hidden, they will likely emerge during periods of uncertainty and stress, or when things actually do go bad. Aaron Gorban, director of risk management for the Appalachian Mountain Club, said that any adventurer should consider both environmental risks and human hazards when deciding whether to go out. "Say my ankle's not feeling great, the weather's turning, and I've got some kids in tow," he said. "The probability that something bad can occur goes up."

Groups of friends usually can work out problems, Gorban said, but he recommends finding "someone whose risk tolerance is reasonably aligned with your own." AMC works with its chapters to offer a hiking-skills curriculum and was training leaders in late 2017 in Rick Curtis's "Dynamics of Accidents" model, taught at Princeton University.

A solo backpacker pauses along the Gulfside Trail below New Hampshire's Mount Washington. JERRY AND MARCY MONKMAN/ECOPHOTOGRAPHY

Finally, I tagged—or rather grazed—the 5,260-foot summit of Mount Lafayette, the highest peak along Franconia Ridge. We had climbed almost 3,500 vertical feet to get there. On many days, the summit more than rewards the work, offering a stunning view of the Pemigewasset Wilderness. Of course, that day, we could see nothing. Wind gusts forced us to hurry off and take shelter behind a rock formation on the leeward side of the peak.

At that point, my two fellow climbers and I started behaving like the steel balls in a poorly designed Newton's Cradle experiment. In our case, the balls kept smashing away from each other rather than creating the momentum to move on and up together. The wind was too loud and the air too cold to talk. Greg asked me for my camera and took a picture of me. I had one glove off and a look of pure misery on my face. When I saw what the photo exposed, it made

me angry. I looked done, cooked, defeated. In fact, I was so upset with what I had revealed that I deleted the image a few days later. Had to preserve that ego.

I wanted to turn around. I definitely did not want to traverse the narrow, wind-battered ridge. But I said nothing to Greg or Dave. Given the strength and direction of the winds, I'm now unconvinced that retracing the way we had come would have been a better option. But the real point is that I had felt I could not speak up much earlier, when I first felt nervous. I had not felt I could talk to these guys about my misgivings and our options.

So, we started our traverse of the ridge. Things got worse.

I am not saying that if I had gone alone that day, I would have been safer. I am saying that if I had realized this was not a good group for me—that we were poorly matched in temperament and didn't know each other—I would not have gone at all. On Franconia Ridge that particular day, for me safety would have meant turning around much lower on the mountain, say at the hut, or staying home. In the group I chose that day, I could not listen to my own wisdom.

So, we started our traverse of the ridge. Things got worse. Shortly after descending the slope of Lafayette and venturing onto the ridge, we approached a sharp drop-off to our right: a drainage gully. As the southwesterly wind slammed into the slope below us, it caught the water, snow, and debris that usually run down the gully and catapulted them upward, onto, and over the ridgeline. It was, by far, the strongest wind I'd ever experienced, the proverbial freight train so often described by those who spend their time in alpine regions.

Greg was out front. As he approached the drainage, he stopped at the edge of the drop and turned to face the wind, extending his arms outward at shoulder length. Then he leaned forward over the edge, into the full force of the wind. Trusting the strength of the headwind to keep him from plummeting headfirst down the long, steep drop, he remained suspended, as Dave and I watched. He was enthusiastically embracing the "full conditions," while I was retreating from them.

When I reflect back on that moment, I don't consider Greg's action to be reckless or risky. The winds were certainly strong and steady enough to hold him up. What is clear to me, though, is how far apart he and I were in that place. We were feet from one another physically but galaxies away from one